

Beware of People Who Are “Holier Than Thou”

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In traveling through airports around the world I have noticed many people who wear distinctive religious garb, and (sometimes) travel in like-attired groups. This made me ponder as to why they tried to broadcast to the world the fact that they were particular religious adherents. I came to realize that, in a way, it was their way of saying to the world that, “I am better than you because my religion is superior and/or because I am more devout than you are.” In itself, such religious devotion need not be threatening. However, at present, some religious adherents, such as “jihadists” and even some murderers of abortion doctors, willingly kill or harm people who do not share the same beliefs. That is not an uncommon result of excessive religious zeal—witness the “crusades,” the “inquisition,” and the long history of religious wars and persecutions throughout history. Thus, the consequence of excessive religious zeal, at times, can manifest itself in the form of violence against others—since “others” are often regarded as being “inferior.”

However, I also realized that violence against others may result from many other situations in which one party believed they were “superior” to another person or group, regardless of whether religious beliefs were involved. People may justify their actions by maintaining that they had superior objectives and that the “ends (their objectives), justified whatever “means” were needed to accomplish those objectives. One can see this most clearly in various political adherents. That approach is also visible with many other quasi-religious secular “ism's,” such as adherents of communism, believers in Marxism, and believers in various other forms of “socialism” dedicated to making the world “a better place,” as defined by the believers. It also includes various “environmentalists,” some people who believe in the “ethical treatment of animals,” and others who claim to have similar “world-improvement” objectives. Political demonstrations and even death threats against Donald Trump have often been organized by people with “Marxist” political leanings who follow precepts laid out by Saul Alinsky in his book, “Rules for Radicals.” In addition, many other people view themselves as members of an “elite,” such as self-appointed “world-improvers.” Such people may view non-members of their group as “inferior” and (like a tribe) may willingly justify engaging in repressive or aggressive behavior against those deemed to be inferior.

Well-educated people, for instance, may wish to deny certain others the right to vote, or even to reproduce, on the grounds that their lesser education makes them “inferior.” People in the public eye, like various contemporary “entertainers”—such as actors, sports stars, media celebrities, and politicians—may deem themselves sufficiently influential so they have the right to advocate violence or various forms of discrimination against those who disagree with them. Some rich people may justify discrimination against “inferior” poorer people.

In short, people tend to have a tribal instinct where those who consider themselves to be devoted members of a “tribe” feel they have the right, and possibly even the obligation, to advocate violence or discrimination against “outsiders.”

Those who are most devoted to their “cause” or their “elite” or “religious” status are most likely to engage in such discrimination or violence against others. Thus, all “others,” who include most people much of the time, must beware “holier than thou” people and their possible propensity to harm “outsiders.” That is why I say: “Beware of People Who Are Holier Than Thou!”

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

People who have a personal or political motive to achieve power or wealth at the expense of others may be motivated to form or organize groups that will support their beliefs. For instance, in his book, Saul Alinsky, an avowed Marxist sympathizer, advocated organizing the “people who had a little and wanted more” through community organizing activities, etc., so they could take from the “haves” and give to the “have-nots.” That provided his rationale for why his followers should seek to do whatever was necessary (since “the ends justify the means”) to obtain political power—which power, not incidentally, would accrue to him and his followers. Political followers of Saul Alinsky may share the same philosophy. Others may also seek to obtain personal power and influence by attracting followers to their “cause.” That is quite often the case with religious cults and may even apply to practitioners of more conventional religions, as well as to organizers of various political interest groups, such as environmentalist leaders, etc. The bottom line is that many people can derive personal satisfaction from gaining power and influence over others, so they try to recruit others to their cause. The cause may or may not be worthy in its own right, but the leaders gain personal satisfaction and potential power, and even wealth, from gaining larger numbers of dedicated and committed followers.

SOURCES OF DEDICATED “BELIEVERS”

Because dedicated followers provide the core of any “holier than thou” organization, existing and would be leaders of such organizations must make an effort to gain and hold new members. Thus, leaders must extol the rightness of their cause and make an effort both to convince their members of that fact and also to proselytize the benefits of their cause and organization to others. In addition, they usually must point out the benefits of their cause to its adherents. Those benefits may include the feeling that they are good people for supporting the cause and may also include promises of possibly more direct personal benefits. In addition, affiliation with such groups may allow people to escape loneliness and feel that they are contributing members of an important group.

Politicians may say that supporting them will allow people to make the world a better place—which may give people personal satisfaction from feeling that they are being altruistic. Politicians may also promise jobs, favorable legislation or direct subsidies, or other personal benefits to their supporters should they be elected.

Religious leaders may also appeal to the altruistic nature of their potential supporters. Most religions encourage charitable works. In addition, most major religions promise personal benefits to qualifying supporters. Since most people fear death, many religions promise that upon death the righteous will have a soul that goes to heaven or paradise or has a more favorable reincarnation, while the laggards will go to hell or purgatory or have an unfavorable reincarnation.

Communists, Marxists, secular socialists, and, even, environmentalists say that their supporters can feel confident that their efforts have helped to make the world a more equitable and/or healthier place and environment in which people can live. Even though their policies may not have the desired effect, they usually defend them by saying that they were not properly applied or that “unintended consequences” led to the less than desired effects. Thus, they continue to proselytize even if adverse effects have resulted from their past policies. For instance, common ownership of the means of production may lead to economic stagnation and a loss of innovation

and, even, rising pollution. Common ownership of land often leads to the “tragedy of the commons” where the land is overused, undermaintained, and loses productivity and its fertility over time. Protection of forests may eventually lead to larger forest fires and protection of specific species by banning hunting may lead to the overpopulation and the starvation of many members of the species in question. Nonetheless, supporters of these secular “isms” continue to maintain that their policies would be beneficial if they were only implemented correctly—since then they would not generate “unintended consequences.” Consequently, they continue to actively recruit new members and view sceptics and outsiders with potential hostility.

HOLIER THAN THOU GROUP ADHERENTS AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

Ultimately, groups of people who are “holier than thou,” and their leaders, rely upon “true believers” to carry and advance their messages. Some people may be attracted to the cause because of their personal self-interest or their desire to feel altruistic. Others may be attracted because they feel that they will gain wealth or power and influence over others. Still others may be attracted because they want to be socially affiliated with others who share similar opinions. Most are not potentially violent, but some “true believers” may become violent toward non-members of the group. One of the most insightful books written after WWII was Eric Hoffer's book, “The True Believer.” It tried to explain why so many Germans had been attracted to the appeal of Adolph Hitler and the Nazi's prior to WWII. He explained that the huge currency inflation after WWI had wiped out the savings and wealth of most of Germany's middle class—leaving the people frustrated due to their loss of economic fortunes and status in life. Thus, they provided a ready fodder for a leader who blamed their economic hardships upon others and many willingly persecuted any members of the groups that their leaders claimed were responsible for their hardship.

The economic frustration of many in the 1930s was aggravated by the great depression in which many people became poor while only a few retained substantial wealth. Thus, income and wealth inequality at that time contributed not only to the growth of “true believers” in Germany, but also to the appeal of various secular “ism's” around the world. In the U.S., many, like Saul Alinsky, were attracted to the Communist and Marxist philosophy. Income inequality, coupled with a perceived inability of the less well-off to gain wealth through their own efforts, may predispose people toward following leaders who claim that political power will allow them, and others, to gain their “proper” place in the economic world. Thus, the realm of potential true believers is likely to grow as economic frustration and inequality grows if there is no way, other than politics, seen as a way to redress economic imbalances.

Potential “leaders” who believe they will gain personally by organizing the frustrated will often emerge to take advantage of the personal frustration of others. Some of the frustrated may respond to appeals to use violence to gain what they want by taking what “outsiders” have.

Potential leaders, including many contemporary politicians, may seek to gain followers by appealing to the frustrated by claiming that they will represent people who have been “victimized” by others. Thus, they may blame the rich for the fact that some people are poor. Or they may claim that members of the other political party discriminate against the group to which an aggrieved individual belongs. They hope to gain personally by organizing and sponsoring various “victimhood” groups that appeal to people who, for various reasons, may be frustrated in their own lives and are looking for scapegoats to blame. Thus, various power-seeking politicians may

seek to organize great numbers of “aggrieved” citizens who will willingly blame others, rather than themselves, for the fact that their lives are not personally satisfying. By aggregating the members of such groups, those “leaders” hope to gain political power that, among other things, will reward them personally with power and prestige and, quite possibly, wealth. Because they and members of the groups they organize claim that their efforts are being expended in service of a greater “cause,” they often may take the attitude that they are “holier than thou” toward others. Therefore, if you are not a member of their group, you must “beware!”

Members of dedicated groups gain personal satisfaction and a feeling of comradeship from being affiliated with such groups and feeling that they are devoted to pursuing a worthy cause. Since their ego and feelings of belonging and self-worth may be, in part, derived from such a membership, they often are reluctant to admit that the group's goals are in error or that their beliefs conflict with reality. If reality diverges from what the group believes, such members may experience “cognitive dissonance.” Cognitive dissonance occurs when a person is exposed to a reality that diverges from his or her beliefs. Unfortunately, a PhD in psychology who has studied the influence of “cults” upon their members notes that when the cult's teachings and beliefs diverge with reality, around 90% of the members retain their belief in the cult and disavow reality or disparate beliefs. In addition, leaders and dedicated members of a “cult” may try to eliminate the exposure of their members to either reality or dissonant beliefs. Thus, some religions or non-religious secular groups may excommunicate or shun or expel non-doctrinaire members. Other religions or cults may advocate killing or torturing heretics or apostates or other dissidents. Some members of groups dedicated to their “holier than thou” cause may also harm, either accidentally or intentionally, non-members that do things that they view as abhorrent to their beliefs. For instance, some people may have died as a result of protests by environmentalists or animal rights advocates that have torched their homes or laboratories or otherwise tried to impede their operations. In addition, the “antifa” group has not hesitated to attack people with baseball bats recently. Consequently, even though a group may have a religious, political or other “do-gooder” organizing theme, members of such groups may become violent when promoting or defending the goals of such groups against others. Thus, beware!

Addendum

The political problem for people who believe in individual responsibility rather than group membership as a way to organize society is to convince people that economies and cultures that depend upon the economic freedom of the individual tend to prosper relative to societies that believe in group control. Unfortunately, it is more difficult to convince people that over time they will be able to do better by depending upon their own resources than they can do by having a politician take what others have and give it to them. It is only after socialistic economies end in poverty and discord that people learn that the main beneficiaries of socialistic economies are the leaders, and not the individual people.

It is particularly difficult to convince people that they will prosper more in the long run if they all rely upon individual incentives rather than follow the dictates of potential “leaders” when self-appointed leaders feel that they will gain by recruiting dedicated followers. Such leaders will seek to exploit various “defects” in humans' ability to think rationally that have developed over time. Those “defects” include the following:

- 1) People prefer to think fast (and emotionally) rather than slow (and logically) since slow thinking takes more work and may not have survival value when quick decisions must be made. (see Daniel Kahneman, “Thinking Fast and Slow”). Along the same lines, most people tend to have high time preference in that they may prefer immediate rewards to delayed rewards.
- 2) Most people tend to have a need for belonging to a family, tribe, group, or culture since such belonging allows them to cooperate more easily with others, achieve benefits of specialization, and increase their joint ability to survive during stressful times. Thus, people with such traits have survived over time better than people who have traits that impede tendencies to feel close to and cooperate with others
- 3) People are often willing to sacrifice on behalf of their family, clan, or tribal group in order to ensure that the group as a whole will survive. I believe a similar point was made by Richard Dawkins in his book on “the selfish gene.”
- 4) Along the same lines, people feel good about themselves when they help their affiliated group survive and prosper and seek to earn approbation from the group because of their efforts. In the limit, such motives may help explain the motivation of “martyrs” and the tendency of various groups to grant awards to members and even to treat some deceased members as either secular (Marx and Mao and Lenin) or religious (Charlemagne or St. Olaf) saints.”
- 5) Because of their desire to feel good, and also for the survival value for the group, people will defend their group against outsiders—even violently, if necessary.
- 6) In order to justify their defense of their beliefs or their group in the face of cognitive dissonance, people may become violent in the defense of those beliefs or the group that maintains those beliefs.
- 7) That is why people must beware of people who are holier than thou since those people are the most committed to supporting their group's beliefs and may be prone to violent or vicious responses if their beliefs are questioned.

Knowing these tendencies of humans allows unscrupulous potential leaders to organize groups who will support them and help them gain power and, potentially, personal wealth and influence. Some political parties have attempted to organize many such groups, each supporting a set of people with particular strong emotionally held beliefs. By doing so, they hope that all the members of such groups will support them at the ballot box as long as they maintain that they will help each group achieve its objectives. They do so even if they know that the objectives of various groups may be mutually inconsistent or lead to contradictory results or other “unintended consequences.” Those leaders only care about gaining immediate power and influence, so they ignore possible long-run inconsistencies.